

# **Performance Appraisal Criteria for Chief Officers in the Lubbock Fire Department**

Executive Development

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### **Abstract**

The Lubbock Fire Department has been conducting annual performance appraisals for its employees for the past 20 years. The problem was the performance appraisals for chief officers did not have objective performance criteria that were significantly different from fire fighters. The purpose of this applied research project was to develop a list of performance indicators to be used in the performance appraisal of chief officers on the Lubbock Fire Department.

Action research methodology was used to answer the following questions:

1. What are the current criteria used to evaluate fire fighters, company officers and chief officers for the Lubbock Fire Department?
2. What criteria do like-sized and adjacent fire departments use to evaluate fire fighters, company officers and chief officers?
3. What benefits would be gained by having separate evaluation criteria for fire fighters, company officers and chief officers?

The literature review examined books, journals and policies relating to performance appraisals. Telephone interviews were conducted with like-sized and adjacent fire departments in Texas to gather more information concerning chief officer performance criteria. Procedures included evaluating performance appraisal forms from each of the fire departments interviewed. The results from the literature review and the telephone interviews showed that performance appraisals were important, but that only three fifths of the respondents had separate criteria for fire fighters and officers.

It was recommended to re-evaluate the job description of district chief and assign measurable performance criteria to that job description. It was also recommended to

have a committee do a task analysis for each rank, re-evaluate all of the job descriptions and match performance criteria with each rank. This should be done prior to continuing annual performance appraisals.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ABSTRACT. ....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>PROCEDURES .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>RESULTS .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>DISCUSSION .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>RECOMMENDATIONS .....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>APPENDIX A (Chief Officer Performance Indicators) .....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>APPENDIX B (LFD Performance Evaluation Form)... ..</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>APPENDIX C (Supervisor Criteria Evaluation) .....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>APPENDIX D (Supervisor Duties/Performance Indicators) .....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>APPENDIX E (District Chief Job Description) .....</b>	<b>36</b>

## LIST OF TABLES

<b>TABLE 1 (Performance Criteria of Like-Sized/Adjacent Fire Departments).....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>TABLE 2 (Telephone Responses).....</b>	<b>18</b>

## INTRODUCTION

As early as the 1900's Frederick Taylor, known as the father of management science, believed that there was a road to higher productivity and better wages (Carter and Rausch, 1989). Taylor made precise observations of every task at hand and developed the "one best method" of doing each task. Carter and Rausch (1989) go on to say that workers of that day were different from today's workers in that they did what had to be done and accepted whatever controls and job conditions managers put on them. Abraham Maslow developed the Hierarchy of Needs, which told us that workers must fulfill their basic needs before fulfilling the higher needs of esteem and self-realization (Carter and Rausch). In the 1950's, Frederick Herzberg was constantly studying aspects of work that made workers feel good or bad in an effort to increase productivity. All of these studies focused on management, which means getting things done through people (Carter and Rausch).

Since that date in time, the pendulum has shifted. Modern management philosophies now focus on motivational climates and psychological needs of the worker (Carter and Rausch, 1989). In their survey, workers were asked what actions previous supervisors could have taken that would have brought additional job satisfaction to them. Respondents answers included; "my boss should know more about what I am doing" and "I want honest feedback about my work" (Carter and Rausch).

In an effort to give effective and honest feedback to workers, performance appraisal systems were developed (Carter and Rausch, 1989). These appraisal systems were intended to give the worker incentive to do a better job. Many fire

departments across the country embraced this philosophy, thinking they too, could get a higher level of productivity out of their workers (Carter and Rausch).

The Lubbock Fire Department (LFD) has had a performance appraisal system in place for more than 20 years (Tom Foster, personal communication, November 17, 1999). The problem is the LFD does not have performance appraisal criteria in place for chief officers that are separate and apart from others in the fire department. Currently, the criteria used to evaluate chief officers are the same criteria used to evaluate line fire fighters and company officers (see Table 1). Chief officers have different job descriptions and responsibilities than those of fire fighters. However, they are evaluated on an annual basis, using the same broad criteria as fire fighters.

The purpose of this applied research project is to develop a list of performance indicators to be used in the appraisal process for the evaluation of chief officers in the Lubbock Fire Department (see Appendix A).

In conducting the research, this author used the action research methodology to answer the following questions:

1. What are the current criteria used to evaluate fire fighters, company officers and chief officers for the Lubbock Fire Department?
2. What criteria do like-sized and adjacent fire departments use to evaluate firefighters, company officers and chief officers?
3. What benefits would be gained by having separate evaluation criteria for firefighters, company officers and chief officers?

## **BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE**

The LFD protects a population of 200,000 people and covers a 126 square mile area. Lubbock is primarily an agricultural and metropolitan hub of the South Plains of West Texas. It is home to three universities, one community college and some light industrial business. The LFD employs 237 line personnel and operates out of 13 fire stations. The LFD has divided the city into two fire response districts and operates three 24-hour shifts. The LFD has a district chief responsible for each of the two response districts on A, B and C shifts. The Fire Chief, two Deputy Chiefs and seven District Chiefs are the top management group of the LFD. This group is one of the most important groups that affect organizational capability on the Lubbock Fire Department (Hailey, personal communication, November 21, 1999).

Annual performance evaluations are conducted for all members of the LFD. Evaluations are completed by the immediate supervisors and forwarded, through the chain of command, to the Fire Chief and filed in the individuals' personnel file. The performance criteria used on the evaluations are primarily based on traits. Lubbock Fire Fighters are rated in ten different trait dimensions as listed in Table 1.

Lieutenants, Captains, District Chiefs and Deputy Chiefs are rated in the same dimensions as Fire Fighters including six additional dimensions (see Table 1). The individual dimensions are given a numerical rating and averaged based on the number of dimensions rated. An overall numerical rating is given to each employee rated on the LFD Performance Evaluation Form (see Appendix B). The LFD utilizes basically the same criteria to evaluate fire fighters as it does to evaluate company officers and chief officers. Since the criteria is based on traits, it is seen by many as being inconsistent

and has resulted in the delayed completion of the annual evaluations (Hailey, personal communications, November 21, 1999). Haas (1997) supports Hailey's observation by stating that many people feel their potential for improvement and growth is being inhibited by the inconsistent and unreliable application of the appraisal instrument.

Another problem surrounding the LFD appraisal criteria is the subjectivity of the dimensions that are being evaluated. The leadership dimension is a good example. Many management researchers have devoted a tremendous amount of time in an effort to determine what distinguishes effective leaders from those who are less effective (Carter and Rausch 1989).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Daft (1998) explains that rather than a single executive being responsible for the entire company or group, the make-up of the top management group is believed to affect organizational capability. Daft's research emphasized the importance of the top management group. Carter and Rausch (1989) point out the importance of the employee getting honest feedback from their superiors. The chief officers or the top management group are included in those employees needing feedback.

Scarpello, Ledvinka and Bergmann (1995) believe the behavior of individual employees, in an organization, is controlled directly and personally by the immediate supervisor. That form of control becomes increasingly ineffective as educated workers holding democratic values perceive it to be autocratic and a show of power on the part of the supervisor. An effective performance evaluation system can result in improved



decision making and more efficient use of human resources (Scarpello et al.).

Performance criteria are those aspects of performance that the individual can control and the organization deems to be important to job accomplishment and therefore uses to evaluate or measure employee performance (Scarpello, et al.). Their research supports the theory that performance appraisals are important and supervisors should be conducting them.

Herr (1999) disagreed with Scarpello et al. by describing fire stations as decentralized workplaces whereby battalion chiefs and officials, at more senior levels, seldom achieve close contact with subordinate supervisors, and therefore are unable to make good, objective evaluations on their performance. Herr wanted to do away with performance appraisals for all employees. His resistance to conducting appraisals led this author to look at different resources for solutions to the problem.

Gratton, Hailey, Stiles and Truss (1999) believe the performance appraisal has been characterized as having two aims: auditing employee performance, and identifying opportunities for training and development. Gratton et al. state that traditionally, performance appraisals have been seen as highly formal, non-participative events. Gratton et al. reinforced the views held by Scarpello et al. and influenced this author to pursue changing the performance appraisal system as opposed to doing away with it.

Haas' (1997) research indicates one must consider quantitative data, the organizational culture and particularly the human and behavioral aspects of people before developing and implementing any employee appraisal system. Haas also believes the individual job descriptions and/or the essential job functions of each rank should be reviewed and updated to include those functions and responsibilities of

specific duties that represent the current position. Haas' research pointed this author in the direction of looking closer at the job functions and responsibilities of each rank.

The book, *Making a Difference: The Fire Officers Role* made the following statement:

Fire officers face a unique set of circumstances seldom encountered by other managers. The stress generated by emergency response, personnel problems resulting from living with each other for extended periods of time, and the blending of tradition with rapid changing technologies are just a few of the unique challenges facing today's fire officers (p. 9).

This perspective led this author to look closer at the differences in fire service managers and other supervisors.

Peterson (2000) believes that improvements in fire company performance rests with the leader of the group. Officers are responsible for the actions of their personnel. Improvements in fire company evolutions equate to quicker and more accurate fire attack, which equates to improved customer service for citizens (Peterson). Peterson's work influenced this author by pointing out the importance of performance-based evaluations for officers.

While some of the literature provided evidence that performance appraisals are outdated and useless, most of the information found pointed to the overwhelming importance of performance appraisals for all employees, including supervisors. The literature also indicated that performance indicators should be tied directly to the job descriptions for each rank.

## **PROCEDURES**

The research procedure used in preparing this paper began with a literature review at the Learning Resource Center at the National Fire Academy in September of 1999. Additional literature reviews were conducted from October 1999 through January 2000 at the Texas Tech Library located in Lubbock, Texas. The research focused first on the need for performance appraisal systems in the fire service. Second, the research studied various employee performance appraisal forms collected from adjacent and like sized fire departments.

This author chose fire departments that were in close proximity and size to the Lubbock Fire Department. Informal telephone interviews were conducted with personnel from each of these departments. The Texas fire departments participating were Abilene, Arlington, Midland, Odessa and Plano.

The information sought included each department's appraisal instrument and whether each department used the same criteria to evaluate chief officers as they used to evaluate other personnel in their department. Each person interviewed was asked to furnish a copy of his or her Employee Performance Appraisal Form. A review was conducted of the appraisal criteria utilized in each form. Comparisons were made of the criteria used for chief officers and those used for company officers and fire fighters. Performance criteria used for supervisory personnel were separated from the criteria used for non-supervisory personnel, such as fire fighters and equipment operators (see Table1). To eliminate any subjective trait-based criteria, (see Appendix C) the remaining supervisory criteria was reviewed. The resulting objective performance-based criteria

were then used to formulate the Supervisory Performance Indicators found in Appendix D.

The duties and responsibilities for Fire Suppression District Chiefs were studied (see Appendix E). Additional objective performance criteria were then applied to each duty and responsibility listed to get the Chief Officer Performance Indicators (see Appendix A).

### **Limitations**

This research project was limited by many factors. To gather the quantitative data needed would have required more time than was feasible. There was very little information found during the research that addressed separate performance criteria for chief officers and fire fighters.

The informal telephone interview did not take into consideration the many different appraisal forms being used by the various departments. One form listed the individuals' performance as highly effective, effective, needs development and not applicable as the choices for each criteria. Another form listed the choices as excellent, above average, proficient, need improvement and unsatisfactory. There were just as many criteria differentials. One form listed a criteria dimension as "job skills" while the next listed a similar dimension as "productivity".

It was discovered that a complete job task analysis should be conducted for chief officers prior to developing the performance indicators. In retrospect, this job task analysis should have been part of the interview process. The telephone interviews were not in-depth enough to gather the data needed to determine the job tasks for chief

officers. The interviews also did not reach enough departments to get a sufficient amount of data.

## RESULTS

### **What are the current criteria used to evaluate fire fighters, company officers and chief officers for the Lubbock Fire Department?**

The criteria used to evaluate fire fighters, company officers and chief officers from the Lubbock Fire Department are listed in Table 1. The criteria are trait-based with each performance dimension receiving a numerical rating from 1 to 10 (see Appendix B). The numerical ratings in Appendix B are totaled and averaged based on the number of dimensions rated.

**Table 1**

#### **Performance Criteria of Like-Sized/Adjacent Fire Departments**

Department	Rank	Performance Criteria
Abilene	Fire fighter	Communication, Customer Service Skills, Initiative, Planning/Organizing, Problem Solving/Decision Making, Supervisory Guidelines, Job Skills
Abilene	Chief Officer	Oral Communication, Written Communication, Customer Service Skills, Initiative, Planning/Organizing, Problem Solving/Decision Making, Supervisory Guidelines, Job Skills, <b>Leadership, Management Control</b>
Abilene	Company Officer	(same criteria as Chief Officer)

(table continues)

Department	Rank	Performance Criteria
Arlington	Fire Fighter	Job Knowledge, Communication, Customer Focus, Teamwork, Initiative, Dependability, Productivity, Quality of Work, Safety, Budget, Planning, Leadership, Employee Development, Program Management, Performance Work Plan, Special Objectives
Arlington	Chief Officer	(same criteria as Fire Fighter)
Arlington	Company Officer	(same criteria as Chief Officer)
Lubbock	Fire fighter	Job Knowledge, Initiative, Attitude, Judgment, Physical Fitness, Quality of Work, Quantity of Work, Adaptability, Personal Appearance, Care of Equipment and Facilities
Lubbock	Chief Officer	Job Knowledge, Initiative, Attitude, Judgment, Physical Fitness, Quality of Work, Quantity of Work, Adaptability, Personal Appearance, Care of Equipment and Facilities, <b>Leadership, Oral and Written Communication, Coordinating, Controlling, Planning, Team Player</b>
Lubbock	Company Officer	(same criteria as Chief Officer)

(table continues)

Department	Rank	Performance Criteria
Midland	Fire Fighter	Job Knowledge, Communication, Initiative, Dependability, Safety, Training Development, Decision Making/Judgment, Employee/Public Relations, Flexibility/Stress Tolerance, Physical Fitness
Midland	Chief Officer	(same criteria as Fire Fighter)
Midland	Company Officer	(same as Chief Officer)
Odessa	Fire Fighter	Job Knowledge, Communication, Initiative, Dependability, Safety, Quality of Work/Volume of Work, Attendance, Attitude and Cooperation, Decision Making, Use of Equipment and Materials
Odessa	Chief Officer	Job Knowledge, Communication, Initiative, Dependability, Safety, Quality of Work/Volume of Work, Attendance, Attitude and Cooperation, Decision Making, Use of Equipment and Materials, <b>Motivation, Delegation, Planning and Organizing, Performance Appraisal, Leadership</b>
Odessa	Company Officer	(same as Chief Officer)

(table continues)

Department	Rank	Performance Criteria
Plano	Fire Fighter	Company Evolution, Individual Evolution, Structural Fire Fighting, Company Physical Fitness, Company Response Times,
Plano	Chief Officer	Company Evolution, Individual Evolution, Structural Fire Fighting, Company Physical Fitness, Company Response Times, <b>Teamwork, Work Production, Team Leader Evaluations, Tactical Response Guides, Company Inspections Program, Customer Satisfaction</b>
Plano	Company Officer	(same as Chief Officer)

Note. Bold text indicates criteria used for supervisory personnel.

**What criteria do like-sized and adjacent fire departments use to evaluate firefighters, company officers and chief officers?**

The results indicate an overwhelming bias towards a trait-based appraisal for all ranks. Of the departments that had different criteria for officers and fire fighters, the majority of the criteria for officers were trait-based (see Appendix C).

The criteria used to evaluate fire fighters from the fire departments interviewed were very similar. The respondents answering the telephone interviews (see Table 2) were asked questions concerning their performance appraisal forms. The results of the phone interviews indicate that more than half of the organizations have additional criteria for



supervisory personnel; however, none of the respondents had separate criteria for chief officers and company officers (see table 1).

**Table 2**

**Telephone Responses**

Department	Do you conduct annual appraisals?	Do you use separate criteria for fire fighters and chief officers?
Abilene	Yes	Yes
Arlington	Yes	No
Midland	Yes	No
Odessa	Yes	Yes
Plano	Yes	Yes

**What benefits would be gained by having separate evaluation criteria for firefighters, company officers and chief officers?**

Three fifths of the fire department respondents interviewed believe that it is important to have separate performance criteria for fire fighters, company officers and chief officers (see Table 2). Of the three departments that use separate criteria, Plano is the only department that uses performance-based criteria.

Peterson (2000) points out that prior written annual evaluation and management audits were subjective and viewed as biased. He implemented a trial performance-based evaluation system for the Plano Fire Department (PFD) in the fiscal year 1994-1995. The fundamental philosophy of the Plano system was that each team or company leader is responsible for the performance of every person under his or her command.

Peterson uses performance-based criteria to evaluate officers in the PFD (see Table 1). Top performing officers are given first choice of station assignments and first choice of personnel assigned. Peterson emphasized that using an evaluation system to improve team leader performance works. The benefits that the PFD experienced were:

(a) Officers see the system as fair and recognize their evaluation is solely in his or her hands; (b) Company personnel are now suggesting ways to improve the system; (c) Personnel are seeing great “stops” and “saves” on the fire scene as a result of evolutions used in the evaluation process and (d) Improvements in company evolution scores directly correlate with improved fire scene operations and a lower community fire loss (Peterson, p.44).

## **DISCUSSION**

Scarpello et al. (1995) describe employees as individuals who generally want to succeed on their jobs and in their careers. They want to know what is expected of them and how well they meet those expectations. It is very important for chief officers to understand what is expected of them. This can be accomplished through supervisors who spell out clear expectations of performance.

It is easy to evaluate a fire fighters performance in areas such as pulling hose or driving apparatus. These types of activities can be directly measured and ranked according to the level of success the fire fighter obtains. The fire fighter gets excellent marks if he or she can pull a pre-connected hose line off an engine, in a pre-determined amount of time, without tying it up in knots. The same fire fighter might get a “needs

improvement” mark on his or her driving skills if the fire truck runs over a curb while driving around the block.

As fire fighters promote to officers, it becomes more difficult to evaluate performance, due in a large part, to the ambiguous nature of an officers job description (see Appendix E). It is even tougher to evaluate the performance of a chief officer. This author agrees that the fire service needs chief officers with initiative, good communication skills, problem solving skills and leadership skills. These are great behavioral traits; however, these traits are difficult to measure. Fire fighters are held accountable for properly pulling hose and operating fire apparatus. Chief officers must be held accountable for properly managing people. It is imperative for chief officers to be good managers; therefore, the key is to measure the things they are getting done through their people.

Gratton et al. (1999) believe that the move towards team-based working, and because patterns of work and interaction are changing constantly, immediate managers are not considered to be the sole best judges of how employees are performing. Peer assessment and 360-degree appraisals tend to give a more rounded picture of employee performance (Gratton et al.). Shifting to a 360-degree appraisal system has some merit; however, this would appear to only spread the responsibility of rating an individual to a larger group. If the employee being rated is still evaluated by the same subjective criteria, the only advantage to the 360-degree appraisal appears to be the wider base of subjective opinions.

The manager (chief officer) in the fire service of today is no different from the manager in the days of Frederick Taylor, Abraham Maslow and Frederick Herzberg.

Chief officers are constantly looking for ways to improve productivity. Whether it is trying to find more efficient and quicker ways to deliver water to the scene of a fire, or trying to increase the morale of the troops. The efforts of these chief officers should not go unnoticed by their superiors. This can only come from their superiors having an active part in their development. Chief officers need honest feedback about the job they are doing. Through an effective performance appraisal system that uses objective criteria, this feedback can produce the goal of heightened productivity.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Additional research is needed to study job descriptions for different ranks. A committee of peers should be created to re-evaluate the complete performance appraisal process. The committee should conduct a job task analysis for every rank and new job descriptions should be written to match the tasks for each rank. New performance criteria for each job description should be developed including company evaluations for district and company officers (see Appendix C).

The Lubbock Fire Department should discontinue the current process of conducting annual performance appraisals for all personnel, including Chief Officers. A new list of performance criteria should be developed for every rank. The criteria should include standards of performance that can be measured.

The beginning of this process must be in writing clear, objective job descriptions. The job descriptions must have measurable criteria, clearly listing the expectations of superiors. Annual and periodic evaluations should be conducted as needed to give the chief officer the honest feedback necessary to increase productivity. The evaluations

should include performance criteria that measures how well the officer is meeting the expectations listed in his or her job description.

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*Appendices Not Included. Please visit the Learning Resource Center on the Web at <http://www.lrc.fema.gov/> to learn how to obtain this report in its entirety through Interlibrary Loan.*